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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: BOLIVAR'S SECURITY SITUATION STILL A CONCERN POST
PARAMILITARY DEMOBILIZATION

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) On March 20, Poloff visited the former conflict-ridden Bolivar department where the overall security, political, and economic situation has improved sharply since 2002. Still, an increase in common crime and other security-related problems remain a challenge. The security and social situation is particularly acute in southern Bolivar, where poverty is widespread and illegal armed groups still operate. The local National Registrar's Office said prospects for transparent regional elections in October have improved due to the paramilitary demobilization, but warned illegal armed groups--FARC and new criminal groups--remain influential in specific municipalities. End summary.

Key Improvements Since 2002

¶2. (C) Governor Libardo Simancas said Bolivar is the biggest department on the north Atlantic coast. GOC presence has always been weak, especially in rural areas, allowing illegal armed groups to operate freely. Still, its overall security, political, and economic situation has improved sharply over the last five years. Before 2002, 14 of the 44 municipalities in the department had no security presence; residents were unable to travel safely throughout the department; the FARC and AUC competed for control; and kidnappings occurred daily. Pursuant to President Uribe's democratic security policy, the GOC has now established a security presence in every municipality, forcing the FARC to withdraw to more remote areas. The paramilitary process and subsequent demobilization also reduced violence and illicit activity, boosting economic growth.

¶3. (C) Bolivar Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) Sectional Chief Ibet Hernandez said greater security

encouraged the population to inform authorities about illegal activities. Currently her office receives some 3,000 tips per month. To tackle common crime, Hernandez said the Fiscalia and police are cooperating to ensure that criminals are not immediately released due to lack of evidence. This cooperation gives Bolivar one of the highest conviction rates in the country.

Crime Still of Great Concern

¶4. (C) Despite the overall improved security, Ombudsman Arturo Zea said common crime in parts of Bolivar has worsened since the last Embassy visit in September 2006 (ref. A). Between 2005 and 2006, murders in Cartagena rose from 230 to 270, primarily due to score settling among former paramilitaries. The police have more personnel, but the demand for security for VIP visits in Cartagena distracts them from focusing on attacking crime. Zea said the day prior to our visit, criminals stole three computers that held four years of information on 1,500 victims of paramilitaries, including pictures and biographical data. He believed the robbers had targeted this sensitive information because other valuable equipment was left behind. (Note: Local UN High Commission for Refugees office head Roberto Meier told Ambassador Shapiro April 18 there has been a series of break-ins targeting computer files of victims' testimony, suggesting a concerted effort by some former paramilitaries to disrupt the Justice and Peace Law process.)

¶5. (C) Zea warned about growth of illegal security cooperatives around the city, which are mostly formed by

ex-paramilitaries. National Police Commander Col. Carlos Mena said they had identified at least eight illegal security cooperatives in neighborhoods in Cartagena demanding security fees from residents. Col. Mena said former paramilitaries were also involved in loan sharking, motorcycle-taxi services, and protection rackets in one of Cartagena's main markets. Caribbean Naval Force Commander Col. Roberto Garcia estimated that five percent of ex-paras in Bolivar have rearmed.

¶6. (C) Col. Mena explained the police had increased its staff to prevent criminals from converting Cartagena into a narcotrafficking port. The city still has a strong presence of criminal groups competing for control of narco/illicit activities, the biggest of which are the "Paisas" and the "Aguilas Negras." He did not consider the "Aguilas Negras" to be a consolidated structure, but a loose conglomeration of independent groups using the name for intimidation and to inflate their importance. The Police chair weekly inter-agency meetings to monitor the changing criminal dynamics in the city.

¶7. (C) First Brigade Commander Col. Bautista Carcamo, Mena and Garcia said the complexity and scope of the security situation in the department makes the Public Forces' work difficult. They divide the department into two areas of greatest security concern: 1) North, Montes de Maria area; and 2) South, Serrania de San Lucas area. The north is a strategic corridor for shipping drugs from the south of the department to the coast. The FARC's 37th and 35th Fronts (around 400 members) and the new criminal groups fight for control of this strategic corridor. In the south, coca is grown, and the GOC is trying manual eradication. The security situation is delicate since all illegal armed groups (IAGs) are present, including ex-paramilitaries (with 30 members), the ERP (with 80 members) and the ELN (with 60 members). The ERP confronts the FARC; the ELN avoids confrontations. Moreover, infrastructure was limited, with most movement limited to rivers. Fiscalia Sectional Chief Hernandez said prosecutors often have to travel by river for over eight hours just to get to the investigation site.

Poverty Levels Remain High

18. (C) The poverty rate is one of the highest in the country; 80 percent of residents in southern Bolivar are poor. Social investment in health and housing coverage is lacking. The department also had over 120,000 displaced persons, 50,000 of whom live in Cartagena. Simancas said the department is working with the Santo Domingo financial group on tourism projects, and with Ecopetrol on a petro-chemical project. There is also an effort to develop an arts and craft industry, which has significant job creation potential. The department also has projects with cacao, palm oil, and cattle raising.

Local Elections in October 2007

19. (C) Registrar's Office Departmental Delegate Fernando Mendoza said the Registrar's Office, in conjunction with the Inspector General's Office (Procuraduria), is developing more effective mechanisms to detect corruption. He said prospects for transparent regional elections in October are much improved due to the demobilization of the Montes de Maria (July 2005) and Sur de Bolivar (January 2006) blocs. The situation has improved sharply since the presidential and Congressional elections in 2002, when he was pressured by paramilitaries to influence the results. Still, Mendoza and Zea warned illegal armed groups--FARC and new criminal groups--remain influential in specific municipalities. Zea said gaming chief and gangster Enilse Lopez (AKA "La Gata")--despite being in prison--is as strong as ever in

Magangue municipality, where she controls the mayor, continues to buy land, and still receives generous payments from her lottery business.
Drucker